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OER (re)use and language teachers' tacit professional knowledge: three vignettes

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10 years of the LLAS elearning symposium: case studies in good practice
Edited by Kate Borthwick, Erika Corradini, & Alison Dickens

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7 OER (re)use and language teachers' tacit professional knowledge: Three vignettes

Tita Beaven¹

Abstract

The pedagogic practical knowledge that teachers use in their lessons is very difficult to make visible and often remains tacit. This chapter draws on data from a recent study and closely analyses a number of Open Educational Resources used by three language teachers at the UK Open University in order to try to capture how their use of the resources is informed by their cognitive, affective and systemic tacit professional knowledge. The chapter concludes that Open Educational Resources and practices can enable us to transform tacit knowledge into shared, commonly usable knowledge, which might result in better learning experiences and practices.

Keywords: OER, OEP, tacit professional knowledge, cognitive, affective, systemic.

1. Context/rationale

Open Educational Resources (OER) are educational resources that have an open licence or that are in the public domain. This means that anyone can copy, use, adapt and share them legally and freely. OER can be entire textbooks, assessment materials, lecture notes and other classroom resources, and are usually in a digital form (e.g. text, video, audio, etc).

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The reason OER are important is that at the heart of the OER movement is “the simple and powerful idea that the world’s knowledge is a public good, and that technology in general and the World Wide Web in particular provide an extraordinary opportunity for everyone to share, use and reuse it” (Smith & Casserly, 2006, p. 10).

Petrides, Jimes, Middleton-Detzner, and Howell (2010) considered that OER “have the potential to enhance teaching and learning practices by facilitating communities of teachers who collaborate, share, discuss, critique, use, reuse and continuously improve educational content and practice” (p. 380), and this close engagement with OER is what defines Open Educational Practices (OEP). In their seminal edited book, *Opening Up Education*, Iiyoshi and Kumar (2008) argued that OER collections can enable teachers to reach a deeper understanding of how others create and reuse resources and thus “build upon one another’s experience and practical knowledge” (p. 3). However, they pointed out that most pedagogic practical knowledge “is notoriously hard to make visible and portable”, as it usually “remains tacit and invisible” (Iiyoshi & Kumar, 2008, p. 436). On the other hand, they argued that OEP are precisely about building the “intellectual and technical capacity for transforming ‘tacit knowledge’ into ‘commonly usable knowledge’” (Iiyoshi & Kumar, 2008, p. 435).

My interest in this area stems from work that has been taking place in the Department of Languages at the Open University (OU) to engage with OER and to promote OEP. The OU teaches languages through a blended model of supported distance learning: students study independently but are supported by teachers. Teachers mark students’ assignments and give them feedback, and also run regular classes, called tutorials. These can be face-to-face but are mostly online, through an audiographic conferencing system, currently Blackboard Collaborate. Resources for tutorials are available in our repository of OER for language teachers, LORO, Languages Open Resources Online¹.

1. <http://loro.open.ac.uk/>

2. Aims and objectives

I am reporting here on a small section of a case study I carried out into the professional practices of OU language teachers when engaging with OER. In the case study, data was generated through professional conversation and peer observation of twelve teachers of French and Spanish at the OU as they were preparing a lesson and again reflecting on the lesson afterwards (Beaven, 2013). The data was analysed using applied thematic analysis.

The attributes, skills and knowledge characteristic of distance (language) teaching and student support have been categorised as cognitive (supporting and developing learning through mediating the course and subject content); affective (providing a supportive, committed environment and enhancing the students' self-esteem); and systemic (providing supportive, effective, and student-friendly administrative and ICT systems) (Tait, 2000).

When starting my research, I asked myself to what extent engaging with open resources and practices might necessitate the exercise of the above attributes, skills and knowledge, and whether it was a useful tool in enhancing the professional practices of teachers. The wider research that this chapter is based on also sought to understand whether teachers reuse, adapt and share OER, and whether this engagement with OER might have a positive impact or influence on their practice. Indeed, some of the literature seems to support this view. After the initial emphasis on the creation of OER and OER collections, in the second and current phase of the OER movement the focus is moving from resources to practices, or “using OER in a way that improves learning experiences and [innovative] educational scenarios” (Camilleri, Ehlers, & Pawlowski, 2014, p. 12). As Ehlers (2011) explains, “OER usage, re-usage, sharing and creation are not an end in itself”, but engaging with them has to result in better teaching practices and learning experiences (p. 7).

In this chapter, I discuss specific resources used in class by three of the teachers in my study, so as to highlight the tacit professional knowledge that they use when developing or adapting teaching resources.

3. What I did

The resources produced or adapted by the teachers in my study are what [Weller \(2009\)](#) calls ‘little OER’, and are fairly simple in their design. Although they might not seem particularly promising at yielding much of an insight into the professional practices of the teachers that have created or re-versioned them, by discussing them in detail it becomes clear that they represent a considerable body of tacit professional knowledge, as the following vignettes illustrate.

3.1. Vignette #1: can I exploit, adapt and enlarge the resource?

S1 is an experienced teacher of Spanish at the OU, and he sees his role as being that of a guide through the learning process. The aim of his tutorials is to provide useful language practice that will enable students to use whatever language they have been learning through their distance study materials. When he looks for OER to use in class, he asks himself: “Is that activity going to be useful in terms of communication? Can I exploit it, can I adapt it, can I enlarge it?”

Although he considers that creating one’s own resources is an important part of a teacher’s role and enjoys the opportunity to be creative, he also acknowledges that time is an issue. However, he considers that creativity in teaching is not just about making new resources, but also about the “performance” in the classroom, the enactment of the lesson with a particular group; in order to avoid merely operating routinely, he injects “an element of creativity” into his lessons, trying out new, different ways of doing things.

[Figure 1](#) is one of the OER for the beginners’ Spanish course available through LORO. S1 explained that he had used this resource often in the past and was using it again in the tutorial we were discussing. Although he starts the activity as suggested, to ensure students know the relevant vocabulary, he then deviates from the lesson notes. These notes suggest students describe where an item of furniture is or to ask each other the location of a piece of furniture. S1 explained

that in the original activity there is no information gap, and therefore little communicative purpose, so he turned it into a guessing game, which is more interesting and fun for students.

Figure 1. Mi habitación (My room) – lesson notes and screen from LORO

Mi habitación
Libro 1Unidad 2 Punto 2.6

Objectives

- Talking about the interior of a room
- Phrases for indicating position.
- There is/ There are

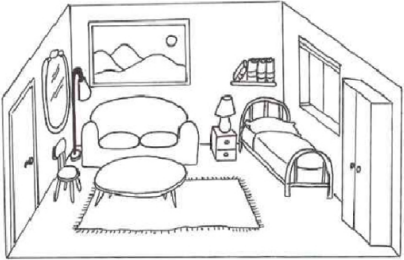
Modules provided
L194Libro1Unidad2_Mi habitación.wbd

Outline

1 *Mi habitación* (5 mins) **PLENUM**
Open L194Libro1Unidad2_Mi habitación.wbd.
(a) Students list objects in the image using *Hay* + indefinite article + object.
If time allows, students state objects that are not there using *No hay* + object.
(b) Taking turns, each student describes where an item of furniture or a feature of the room is, e.g. *La ventana está al lado de la cama* or *La alfombra está en el centro de la habitación*. Or you can get students to ask each other about each piece of furniture, e.g. *¿Dónde está la silla?*
La silla está al lado del sofá, delante de la mesa

2 Answer any questions and provide feedback in English. **PLENUM**

MI HABITACIÓN



As well as changing the way the main activity worked, S1 devised a follow-up activity about nouns including the sound ‘r’:

“Then I did a quick follow-up activity to practice the pronunciation of the sound ‘r’ with words such as *lámpara*, *alfombra*, *armario*, *puerta*, *libros* and so on...”

In this vignette, we have seen how S1 exploits, adapts and expands the use of a specific OER in his tutorial.

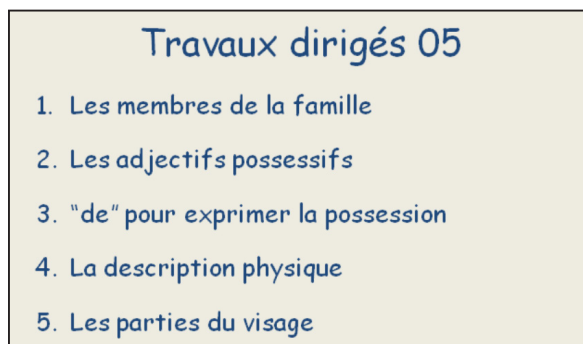
3.2. Vignette #2: metalanguage and reflection

F1 has taught French at the OU at all levels, including beginners, for over ten years. She believes the main aim of tutorials is to provide students with the opportunity to practise their speaking skills, and this is what she was advised when she joined the OU. However, over the years, she has come to realise that the students need help with study skills:

“I feel that my role now is not just to provide opportunities for speaking, but also for developing language learning skills and distance learning skills... And that involves goal setting, self-reflection, evaluation of learning, etc”.

F1’s tutorial welcome screen is in French, and includes a list of the grammatical structures and vocabulary areas that will be practised in the tutorial (Figure 2). At first, it might seem a bit daunting to students, who might not be familiar with the language or with the meaning of some of these headings.

Figure 2. F1’s welcome screen

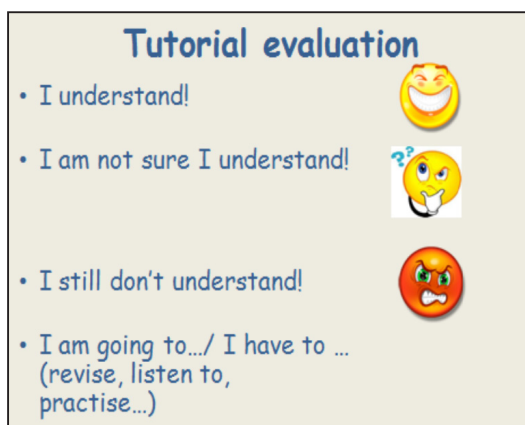


However, as she explained, F1 tries to introduce “very repetitive, very ritualistic” expressions in French in her communications with students from the start via the different systems at her disposal (personal emails, postings on the class forum, feedback on the students’ assignments, etc). These might include greetings, farewells, and thanks for participating in activities. She also posts an agenda with the content of the next tutorial in the online forum for her group. She writes this in French, and then includes a translation into English at the end. So when students attend the tutorial, the welcome screen in French is not as daunting, as they have already seen this, and the translation, in the forum message.

When we discussed the possibly daunting use of grammatical terminology in the welcome screen, F1 explained:

“When I used to teach face-to-face [with another institution...], students were begging me to teach them English grammar and I used to joke, “I am qualified to teach you French grammar, but not English grammar”. Then I qualified as an ESOL and as an EAP tutor and I did that quite a lot, teaching grammar. I also worked in adult literacy; I qualified as well as an adult literacy tutor and it’s all about – [...] “Oh, no, we are not going to bother their pretty heads with all that jargon”. It’s not about jargon; it’s about understanding a structure. It’s about being able to memorise because you understand the bigger picture, and it’s that dreadful school of thought that did away with grammar teaching at school. It’s not about prescriptive grammar, it’s about descriptive grammar, it’s about understanding, it’s about choices. So, when you say “nominal group”, it’s very important because that’s when you are going to understand why you made all these mistakes. It’s because of your word order, because the word order is different. So I always give them... not too much, but I make it understandable, I make it accessible, and then it becomes quite obvious”.

Figure 3. F1’s tutorial evaluation resource



F1 always ends the tutorial with an evaluation (see Figure 3). For her, what is important is not only how students feel they’ve done, but she also asks them:

“What are you going to do? What is the next step? [...] It’s about becoming a self-reflective learner, and being proactive, and really developing independent learning skills. You need to be able to assess where you are, where you should be at, and what you need to do in order to get there...”.

This vignette has shown how this teacher incorporates metalanguage and reflection in the resources she uses, and the professional knowledge and understanding she draws on when doing this.

3.3. Vignette #3: providing a security blanket

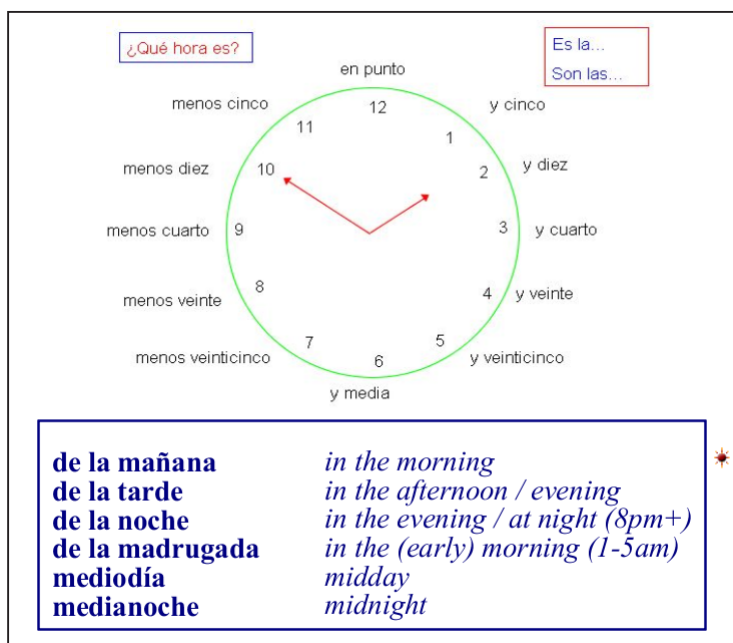
S2 is another very experienced teacher of Spanish at the OU. She sees her role in relation to her students as being “a facilitator of their studies, one of the tools in their course of study”. She also explains that, with beginner students, at the start of the course she tends to be “more teacher-like, and by the end it’s tutor/facilitator”. With more advanced students on other courses, she adopts the role of facilitator from the start.

S2’s resource is for an activity to practise telling the time (see [Figure 4](#)). This is the second screen of the tutorial, after a welcome screen, and is the first of a sequence of seven screens and activities which start with very controlled practice, and move on to freer practice, as is standard in communicative language teaching.

This screen is a reminder of some of the language that students have already covered in the course. S2 also sends her students a preparation document before the class with the language that is going to be practised in the tutorial. However, she knows that not all students will have time to study the preparation document, so she has modified the original resource by adding the box at the bottom with the time expressions, and the two smaller boxes at the top. This rather didactic approach fits with how she sees her role at the start of the beginners’ course. Moreover, the addition of the language boxes with the key linguistic structures also serves the role of providing affective support for students:

“It’s really there as a reminder to them rather than having to look at notes or whatever. [...] It’s quite early on [in the course] so their confidence is not as great in general... That’s why I do that, I think it’s more like a comfort blanket for them”.

Figure 4. S2’s adapted resource from LORO for telling the time



S2 is aware that for students who are new to learning from a distance, online tutorials can be challenging, and that many feel nervous “because it is nerve-racking being online because, although you can’t be seen, you can’t hide at all, whereas in face-to-face, you can hide [laughs]”. So the addition of the language structures to the screen offers students comfort and security. The tutorial, however, is sequenced so that, as students gain confidence with the system, with each other, and with the language they are practising, they also move away from the very controlled, supported practice to more open, freer activities. The final activity is a photo of a young woman in a tracksuit, and

students speculate about her daily routine. This time, though, “they can’t rely on the comfort blanket that I’ve been putting up throughout the tutorial. It’s more natural in fact, more real, they don’t have their notes and everything in front of them”.

4. Discussion

These vignettes illustrate how teachers use and adapt OER, and the sorts of tacit professional knowledge that they make use of when engaging with such resources and practices.

S1’s adaptation shows how he uses resources to revise and extend the students’ skills in ways that are congruent with his communicative approach, and how he adapts the use of the resource to prevent his own professional obsolescence and inject an element of creativity to his performance in the classroom.

F1’s introductory slide can be seen to embody her beliefs about the importance of understanding linguistic and grammatical metalanguage; her final screen represents her interest in students developing self-reflection and independent learning skills.

S2’s case illustrates how the additions the tutor makes to the resource fit with her self-image as a teacher. By adding text boxes, her communicative approach moves students on from controlled to freer practice, and shows her understanding of the importance of affective support for students in an online environment.

5. Conclusion

The three vignettes I have presented illustrate how, when engaging with OER, the teachers in my study draw on their tacit professional knowledge, which includes cognitive, affective and systemic attributes, skills and knowledge.

As Petrides et al. (2010) point out, “OER—as resources that lend themselves to collaboration, knowledge sharing about practices, adaptation and reuse—support conversations and practices that may not traditionally be available through professional development” (p. 383). If the aim of engaging with open educational resources and practices is that this results in better teaching practices and learning experiences (Ehlers, 2011), then it is important to find ways and spaces where teachers can articulate and share their tacit knowledge when engaging with OER, so that it can become “commonly usable knowledge” that will enhance the quality of teaching and learning (Iiyoshi & Kumar, 2008, p. 436).

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